

SILVER: NO DECISION ON MOVING ALL-STAR GAME FROM CHARLOTTE

LAS VEGAS: NBA owners made no decision Tuesday after a lengthy debate about moving next year's All-Star Game from Charlotte because of North Carolina's law limiting protection for LGBT people.

Commissioner Adam Silver said no vote was taken at the Board of Governors meeting, but the league realizes a decision has to come fairly quickly. He said he was personally disappointed North Carolina legislators didn't modify the law enough in recent weeks to make the discussion moot.

"We feel this law is inconsistent with the core values of the league," Silver said. Silver said the NBA was put in a situation not entirely its own making because the law was enacted by North Carolina's legis-

lature after the 2017 All-Star Game was already awarded to Charlotte.

He added that the game is important for the league in ways that aren't always shown on the court. "The primary test for us is under this law whether we can successfully host our All-Star week," he said. "It is more than a game, it is a week full of activities in North Carolina. The question for us becomes in this situation, given the controversy, given the amount of discussion, given how hardened the views are, is this the place we should be in 2017, at the epicenter of global basketball where we can go celebrate our game and our values."

Silver did not say when a decision would be made on possibly moving the

game, but that the clock is ticking.

"We're not trying to keep everybody in suspense," he said. "We realize this decision has to be made very quickly." Silver's remarks come less than two weeks after North Carolina legislators revisited the law and chose to leave it largely unchanged. During their yearly work session that ended this month, the General Assembly restored the ability of workers to use state law to sue over employment discrimination on the basis of race, religion and other factors - but left gender identity and sexual orientation unprotected.

The law passed in a March special session also excludes sexual orientation and gender identity from antidiscrimination

protections related to the workplace, hotels and restaurants; and overrules local antidiscrimination ordinances. Republican leaders have said the law was passed in response to a Charlotte ordinance that would have allowed transgender people to use restrooms consistent with their gender identity.

The fate of the law is likely to be decided in federal courts where dueling lawsuits are being heard, though those results are likely to come after the NBA has to make its decision on the All-Star Game. Elsewhere, other states have filed lawsuits challenging federal guidelines on transgender bathroom access in schools.

A day before North Carolina's legisla-

ture passed the minor change related to workplace lawsuits, the NBA issued a joint statement with the Charlotte Hornets saying that it had discussed the issue "with numerous groups at the city and state levels," but it doubted proposed changes would go far enough.

Charlotte officials have said they expected the event to have an economic impact of around \$100 million, based on data from recent All-Star games in the comparable New Orleans and Orlando markets. The game could rival the \$164 million economic impact of the 2012 Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, the largest financial bump of any event for the city. — AP

BALL TO MAKE ENGLAND DEBUT AGAINST PAKISTAN

LONDON: Jake Ball is set to make his England debut against Pakistan at Lord's today after captain Alastair Cook confirmed his place in the side a day before the start of the first Test.

Ball was in the squad for all three Tests without playing during England's preceding 2-0 series win (with one draw). But Ball has now been included after James Anderson, England's all-time leading wicket-taker, was ruled out of the first of this four-Test series with a shoulder injury.

"Jake will make his debut," Cook told reporters at Lord's yesterday. "Unfortunately Jimmy has missed out but it's a great opportunity for Jake," the opening batsman added.

The 25-year-old Ball has edged out fellow uncapped seamer Toby Roland-Jones, who was hoping to make his Test debut on his Middlesex home ground, from an original 12-man squad.

Ball came into England contention after a breakthrough 2015 season which saw him take 67 wickets across all formats for Nottinghamshire. He followed that up with a dramatic start to the current English campaign, which has so far seen Ball take 37 first-class wickets at an average of just 22.

"I'm looking forward to seeing how he goes, he's had a great year with Notts and looks a fine bowler," said Cook. "He's got wicket-taking balls in him, the ability to get good players out on flat wickets, and he puts the ball in good areas with good pace."

Cook added that Ball would open the attack alongside his Nottinghamshire team-mate Stuart Broad. Anderson suffered a stress fracture to his right shoulder blade during the Sri Lanka series. The 33-year-old bowled in the nets as did all-rounder Ben Stokes who is also nearing a return to full

fitness after playing for Durham as a batsman only after recent knee surgery.

But with the second Test starting at Lancashire swing specialist Anderson's Old Trafford home ground a week on Friday, the selectors were wary of taking a chance on him at Lord's.

"He's not (bowling) quite at full pace, and I think the risk of going into five-day Test match with that injury, an injury that not too many people have had, just had a bit of a doubt about it," said Cook.

"I think the selectors decided that there are three other games, and he should be fit for Old Trafford. They were concerned that if he did have one of those stints at Lord's, on a flat wicket, he could be bowling 30-odd overs and we are not quite sure how his shoulder will stand up to that."

The build-up to this match has been dominated by the expected return to Test cricket of Pakistan pacer Mohammad Amir on the ground where six years ago he took part in an infamous spot-fixing scandal by deliberately bowling no-balls.

Amir, now 24, received a five-year ban from cricket for his part in the affair but Cook once more insisted he had no qualms about playing against the left-arm quick.

"I've said all along I don't think match fixers should be allowed to play but at the time he was given his punishment, he's served it so he's entitled to come back. He's served his time," said Cook.

"It's the big story about this Test match, but I thought the way both sides played in the UAE (in 2015) that the spirit between us was different to in the past, and I hope we can carry that on and talk about the cricket."

England: Alastair Cook (capt), Alex Hales, Joe Root, James Vince, Gary Ballance, Jonny Bairstow (wkt), Moeen Ali, Chris Woakes, Stuart Broad, Steven Finn, Jake Ball. — AFP



LONDON: Pakistan's Mohammad Amir (C) gestures during a training session at Lord's cricket ground in London yesterday. England play Pakistan in the first Test match starting today. Pakistan's Mohammad Amir will hope to put the 2010 spot-fixing scandal behind him once and for all when he returns to the scene of the crime in today's first Test against England at Lord's. — AFP

PAKISTAN UNITES BEHIND AMIR AHEAD OF LORD'S RETURN

KARACHI: When Pakistan's convicted spot-fixer Mohammad Amir takes to the field at Lord's yesterday, the bowler can expect overwhelming support from his homeland as he faces a potentially prickly reception from the English crowd.

The 24-year-old appears almost certain to make his return to Test cricket at the home of cricket where he and two teammates were found guilty of arranging no-balls to order as part of an elaborate betting scam devised by a tabloid journalist six years ago.

The trio served jail sentences over the affair in what was perhaps the biggest scandal to hit the sport. England's captain Alastair Cook has already stated Amir can expect "a reaction" from English spectators while former English cricketers Kevin Pietersen and spinner Graeme Swann have joined the ranks of those calling for a life ban for all fixers.

Back home in Pakistan, however, ex-players and most fans have come around to forgiving the left-arm pacer, citing his youth at the time of his crime and early admission though some still have reservations about what example his return sets to would-be fixers.

Legendary bowler Wasim Akram, who led the country to their last Test series win in England in 1996, said he believes Amir can weather the hostility. "People want Amir to do well so there will be enormous pressure on him but I am confident that he will come out a winner," he told AFP.

Muhammad Asif, one of Amir's co-conspirators who is now playing club cricket in Norway, also pleaded for understanding. "I request to England players and fans to allow Amir to play freely. He and two of us others committed a mistake, were punished and now our bans are over so let us play," he said. Despite initial resistance from certain players, Amir's current teammates have united behind him while fans almost unanimously back their hero.

ROAD TO REDEMPTION?

"What happened with Amir is now past," said Shariq Mahmood from Karachi, a die-hard fan who travelled to India to watch the World

Twenty20 in March this year.

"The way he (Amir) is bowling I think he will bamboozle England batsmen with his swing," he added, referring to the youngster's slew of wickets against Sussex in a warm-up match where his fast pace and late movement won wickets and praise. Zaair Hussain, a project manager at a game studio in Lahore, added: "The return of Amir has been something I've been eagerly awaiting the redemption at the end of this long tragic arc. 'A young man stupidly threw away one of the most promising careers of his generation over a pittance. From the first day, he said he would work to make himself worthy again. After five long years, his punishment served, he is back and a live wire on the pitch.'"

A few, however, expressed ambivalence because of Amir's perceived lack of humility since his return and the troubling signal his comeback sends in a country that has been tainted by the spectre of match-fixing since the 1990s. Pakistan start the tour firm underdogs,

though are considered to have their best chance of victory in the four-match Test series where much will rest on the ability of Amir and leg-spinner Yasir Shah.

"Watching him bowl in Tests, especially in England was a thing of joy so I can't not look forward to that," said Sana Kazmi, an education consultant in Karachi. "But also, personally, as a fan, I just needed him to say 'Sorry I screwed up' unconditionally and he never did that. 'I'm sorry I got misled' is not quite the same thing for me."

The differing approach by the Pakistan Cricket Board to Asif and Amir's former captain Salman Butt, both of whom remain out of national contention despite having also served their bans has also irked some.

"He's a phenomenal talent, phenomenal," said marketing professional Anthony Permal from Karachi. "So we're teaching our children that if you're really good at what you do, we will forget your sins. But, if you're mediocre, get ready to be thrown under the bus." — AFP



LONDON: England's captain Alastair Cook takes part in a practice session at Lord's cricket ground in London yesterday. — AFP

TENDULKAR CALLS FOR MORE HELP FROM PITCHES FOR BOWLERS

LONDON: Cricket pitches need to be more bowler-friendly if the rising imbalance between bat and ball is to be addressed, Indian batting great Sachin Tendulkar has said.

The Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) world cricket committee on Tuesday recommended limitations on the thickness and depth of bats amid concerns that the sport has tilted heavily in favour of the batsmen in recent years.

A report commissioned by the MCC, the guardian of the game's laws, in 2014 found the thickness of bats had marginally increased in the last century and that edges had broadened by 300 percent, meaning even mistimed shots could still find the boundary.

Tendulkar, who quit international cricket in 2013 as the game's most prolific batsman both in tests and the 50-over format, demanded more assistance for the bowlers from the playing surface.

"The wickets need to change; they need to be more helpful for bowlers," Tendulkar said. "In T20s, the greatest of bowlers are being reverse-swept. Three-hundred is no longer competitive in ODIs. 'So there should be at least one format where bowlers have a better chance of executing their skills and making it more interesting for spectators. 'I don't think it's got much to do with bats, but I'm sure people on the (relevant) panel will be able to look into it."

Tendulkar's views echoed the sentiments of Australian opener David Warner who said last week that flat pitches rather than bats with thicker edges are the reason batsmen have the upper hand in test cricket. Tendulkar was part of the panel that recommended Anil Kumble for the India coach's job and he expects the team to benefit from the vast experience of the former leg-spinner.

"A fabulous player, a hard competitor and will not make any compromises on the field," Tendulkar told ESPNcricinfo. "He will be out there to win each and every moment."

"He played for almost 20 years, so there is plenty to share. I'll just tell the players to grasp as much information from Anil as possible," Kumble, who came out to bowl with a bandaged jaw in a 2002 Antigua test, can also teach the players how to handle adversity, said Tendulkar. "There are always big, crunch moments in any match and how to approach those moments is important," Tendulkar said.

"In sport, over a period of time what you learn is not every day you are successful, sometimes you have to face failures. 'It is all about being a tough character and be able to stand back on your feet again and to compete the next day. Every day is a fresh day, new beginning. That is something I feel Anil will teach them." — Reuters

ROOT DISMISSES WAHAB 'TRASH TALK'

LONDON: England batting mainstay Joe Root has dismissed "trash talk" by Pakistan pacer Wahab Riaz who claimed he has got the batsman's number going into the first test at Lord's starting today.

Root will return to the crucial number three position in the batting line-up against Pakistan and Wahab has already turned the heat on him, claiming the visitors have plans ready for the 25-year-old. "I heard about that. It's the same before every series, you generally get a bit of trash talk," Root told reporters.

"It's getting a bit like boxing now. He is a fantastic bowler. Good pace, gets the ball to reverse swing, so it will be interesting to see how that goes throughout the series."

Root has excelled at number four and five and the right-hander is now keen to justify his promotion to top three. "I've matured quite a lot as a player and my game has developed a lot," he said. "It will be interesting to see how it goes." Wahab reiterated Pakistan's plans to unsettle Root in Tuesday's news conference.

"You want me to tell you the plans? Every batsman has a strong point and a weak point and obviously you have to work hard on that and practise hard on that," said the 31-year-old left-arm pacer.

"Joe Root is the backbone of the England team and getting him out early will put the pressure on England. If he thinks it is just trash talk then hats off to him." — Reuters



SAINT KITTS: Indian cricket team captain Virat Kohli (C) and his teammates warm up during a practice session at the Warner Park stadium in Bassetterre, Saint Kitts, yesterday. — AFP